

# The first plane flight to Easter Island – the Roberto Parragué Singer story

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Roberto Parragué Singer was a pilot in the Chilean Air Force with a vision. As a pioneer airman he has classical status. He encountered official indifference and even active opposition to his vision but lived to see the fulfilment of his dream. He wanted to see the opening of a new air route across the Pacific and saw Easter Island as an obvious staging post 2300 miles from Santiago with another 2500 miles to Tahiti.

Parragué was a short, stocky family man with four children. He not only dreamed of an air route but was determined to fly it himself. He was a Catalina amphibious aircraft pilot and repeatedly asked for permission to make a proving flight to Easter Island. He was just as repeatedly turned down by the Chilean Minister of Defence, and by his commanding officer. To be fair, many other pilots considered the idea potentially almost suicidal. It would be no mean feat to find the tiny island set in a million square miles of empty ocean. No plane could carry sufficient fuel to make a return flight, or for hours of circling trying to locate the island. Nevertheless, Parragué fully intended to try. He specialized in long distance navigation and had organized the celestial navigation school in the Chilean Air Force.

He achieved some support for his ideas and, in 1950, he visited Easter Island on the annual supply ship with an engineering crew and selected a site for the runway at Mataverí. A 2000 foot grass runway was cleared.

He corresponded with a fellow aviation pioneer, the Australian Captain Patrick Gordon Taylor, who was planning to make a trans-Pacific proving flight from Sydney, Australia to Valparaíso, Chile. They mainly exchanged technical

information, but their political courses were similar. Taylor had approached Sir Robert Menzies, the Australian Prime Minister, for support, and Menzies directed the Royal Australian Air Force to give him a Catalina flying boat. This Taylor named *Frigate Bird II*, after the aircraft in which he had carried out his wartime explorations of the Pacific.

Meanwhile, Parragué had obtained the approval of the Chilean President, Gonzales Videla, for his own flight to Easter Island and made ready with a Catalina PBY-5A amphibian at the post of La Serena. He called the plane *Manutara*. The Chilean navy sent two ships to Easter Island to act as lookouts. There had been some thought about the two airmen meeting at Easter Island, but Roberto Parragué's position was too politically sensitive for him to delay, it being seen as a matter of national pride that the first person to fly to Easter Island should be a Chilean national.

On 19 January 1951, the plane took off from La Florida Aerodrome in La Serena for the experimental flight watched by President Videla and an enthusiastic crowd of 25,000. La Serena possibly had the advantage of a flight more to the north than the Quintero Air Base with better weather conditions. However, Parragué explained his choice of La Serena as the departure point as being more political than technical – the president was born in La Serena! At the last minute, Group Captain Barrientos, commanding officer of the flying boat base at Quintero, joined him as passenger.

Parragué landed on Easter Island 19 hours and 20 minutes later and *Manutara* became the first plane ever to land on the island. At that moment a new era opened in the story of



Figure 1. 19 January 1951 cover from Roberto Parragué's proving flight from Chile to Easter Island.

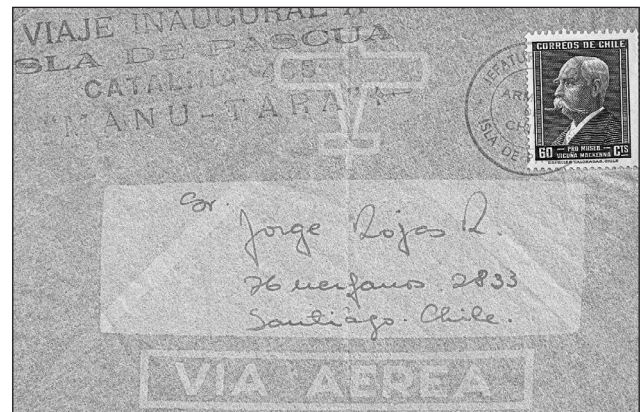


Figure 2. This cover was onboard the plane for the return flight.

Easter Island. He received an enthusiastic welcome from the islanders and the achievement was celebrated in Chile. President Videla ordered his promotion to commander.

In gratitude for Parragué's achievement, the islanders gave to the people of La Serena one of their most precious treasures, a *moai* almost four meters tall, which remains on display in the archaeological museum of La Serena today.

Most mail carried on the flight was cancelled with a postal mark at Quintero Air Base, where the plane was based, on 19 January 1951, and also received a large four line violet cachet "VIAJE INAUGURAL A/ ISLA DE PASCUA/ CATALINA 405 / MANU-TARA." A few covers were cancelled with postal marks at La Serena (where the flight actually started). On arrival at Easter Island the letters were stamped with the double circle cachet of the military commander on the island, Captain Luis Aceituno. Some also had the date of arrival 20.1.51 added in manuscript. There is an additional double circle cachet on the reverse of the cover.

There was nothing congratulatory about the signal received from Parragué's seniors in the Chilean Air Force. It conveyed a peremptory "Service Urgency" demand that he return immediately to the mainland. Preparations were made for the return flight but a storm with torrential rain made the runway too waterlogged to allow a take-off with maximum weight. The only chance for success was to fly *Manutara* light from the landing strip and put her down on the sea to load the maximum amount of fuel. This was very difficult in the weather conditions but Parragué managed to achieve it.

Then came the moment for take-off, with a full load of fuel. The waves were very high and the plane struggled into the air, but with the great weight she failed to lift. The starboard wing struck the water, damaging the float. Parragué kept the throttles open and pulled her into the air, but the damage she had suffered meant there was no chance of flying to Chile. He brought her over land and, despite the weight, successfully landed back at Mataverí. Islanders pushed the plane into the shelter of one of the few lines of trees. Parragué and Barrientos returned to Chile on the gunboat *Allipen* with the mail.

Parragué was in quick contact with P.G. Taylor in Sydney, telling him of his experiences and the operational implications. As a result Taylor delayed his departure until his *Catalina* flying boat could be equipped with jet assisted take-off (JATO) rockets. She was not amphibious and could not use the makeshift runway at Mataverí.

P.G. Taylor's trans-Pacific flight in *Frigate Bird II* began from Sydney on 13 March 1951. He island-hopped across the Pacific, reaching Mangareva in the Gambier Archipelago, his springboard for Easter Island, on 22 March. Wind and sea conditions forced him to land on the opposite side of the island to where the refuelling boats were, resulting in considerable delay. Taylor and his crew came ashore and the islanders showed him Parragué's *Manutara*, still under the trees with her broken float.

Taylor was impatient to be away from this dangerous place, despite the welcoming islanders, and was uneasy



Figure 3. P.G. Taylor and crew inspecting Roberto Parragué's *Manutara*. Photo courtesy of Bryan Jones.





Figure 4. Roberto Parragué greets P.G. Taylor in Valparaíso. Photo courtesy of Bryan Jones.

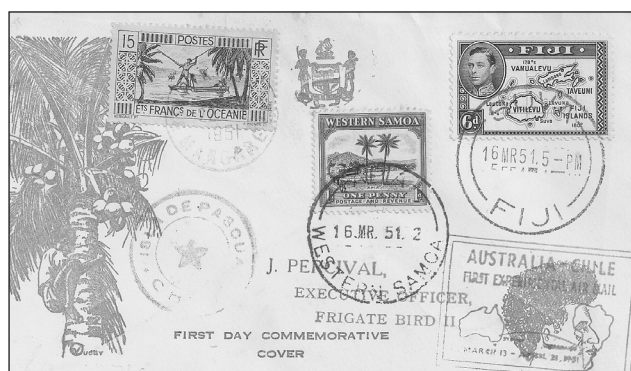


Figure 5. Illustrated cover from Fiji franked 6d postmarked Suva 16 March 1951 (on outward trip from Australia), Western Samoa 1d postmarked Apia 16 March, French Oceania 15c postmarked Mangareva 22 March and an undated Isla de Pascua (Easter Island) star cachet of the Compañía Explotadora de la Isla de Pascua.

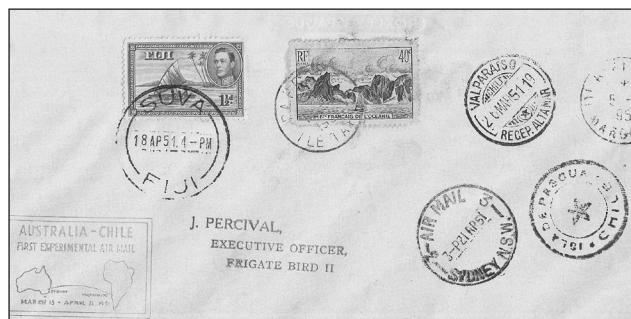


Figure 6. Cover flown on the return trip with Valparaíso postmark, undated Isla de Pascua (Easter Island) star cachet, Mangareva postmark, Pape'ete postmark on French Oceania stamp, Suva, Fiji stamp and postmark and an arrival mark for Sydney 21 April 1951.

*Note: These two covers each have the Easter Island star cachet of the Compañía Explotadora de la Isla de Pascua; one applied on the outward and one on the return flight.*

about the deteriorating weather and rising seas as fuel was slowly pumped into the flying boat. Take-off was attempted at dusk but was unsuccessful. He brought her back to the anchorage and the crew remained onboard. Overnight the anchor carried away and *Frigate Bird II* spent the night riding out the rough seas.

The next day, with the aid of the JATO rockets the flying boat succeeded in taking off. The flight to Quintero Air Base was uneventful. For this pioneering flight from Australia to Chile, all crew members were made honorary officers of the Chilean Air Force and P.G. Taylor was awarded the "Al Merito Bernardo O'Higgins" (named after the first president and founder of the Chilean Republic). *Frigate Bird II* is now on display in the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney.

Although the damage to *Manutara* was not great, the cost of repairing it on Easter Island meant that the Air Force commanders struck it off charge, and decided to bring it back to the mainland with the intent to use all useful parts as spares for the remaining Catalina fleet.

The prospect of a trans-Pacific air route remained Parragué's burning preoccupation. In January 1952, he tried to rescue *Manutara*, returning to the island on the annual supply ship with an engine and parts which he had "borrowed" from the Chilean Air Force. Repairs were started but a Chilean warship arrived. The commander-in-chief of the Air Force knew what Parragué had intended, but had ordered his arrest and return to the mainland. When he returned home he found Chile had a new president, General Ibáñez. He explained that he had not been attempting to steal airplane parts from the Chilean Air Force but that he aimed to further his ambition to open Easter Island to a new era of air travel. The new president was impressed and no more was heard of any theft charge.

Later, Parragué and an Air Force team visited the island by sea, carrying the necessary spares and a new starboard wing. Repairs were completed and permission was requested to fly her back to Chile, but this was refused by the Chilean Air Force authorities. It was decided that *Manutara* had to be loaded on board the Chilean cruiser *Pinto*. Parragué succeeded in taking off from the Mataverí airfield and landed the plane by the side of the ship. The plane was loaded on deck, departing for Chile. In May 1952, *Manutara* arrived in Quintero and again was able to perform a short flight after being off-loaded from the ship. In July, after a complete check, she was restored to Air Force service.

Parragué was sent to Southern Chile to command an airbase in Puerto Montt. He continued to push for the construction of an airstrip on Easter Island, starting "la Sociedad de Amigos de Isla de Pascua", an all-Chilean Friends of Easter Island Club. In 1953, the Williamson-Balfour Company's (Compañía Explotadora de la Isla de Pascua) lease came up for renewal. The Chilean government refused to renew the lease, but offered to buy the buildings and livestock (Mann 1976:158). They announced that in the future, the Navy would run the sheep farm and profits would



Figure 7. Reply paid postcard returned from Easter Island on Parragué's 1959 flight with receiving mark for Quintero Air Base.

be used to better the lot of the islanders. A small hospital was built, and a few dirt roads, but very little changed for the better for the islanders (Mann 1976:158-9).

Parragué's failure to complete a round trip to Easter Island continued to rankle him. In 1959, he was a colonel and flight commander of Wing Two at Quintero Air Base. On 29 January, he was due to make a regular flight to the Juan Fernández Islands but instead made an unauthorized return flight to Easter Island using his original plane, the *Manutara*.

The post office on the island took advantage of the unexpected flight to send accumulated mail to the mainland, rather than continuing to wait for the annual supply ship.

Despite this successful achievement, the commander-in-chief of the Air Force was incensed, and Parragué's political connections could not save him this time. He was forced to retire and leave the Air Force.

On 15 June 1961, *Manutara* broke her wings when she crashed in Peñuelas Lake during a crew training flight, killing all the crew. She was not preserved, but in 2005 a Canadian Catalina was rebuilt to represent the original *Manutara*, and is now on display in the Museo Nacional Aeronáutico y del Espacio de Chile (the national air and space museum) in Santiago.

Parragué turned to the trade industry of the Juan Fernández Islands, which exported 120,000 spiny lobsters

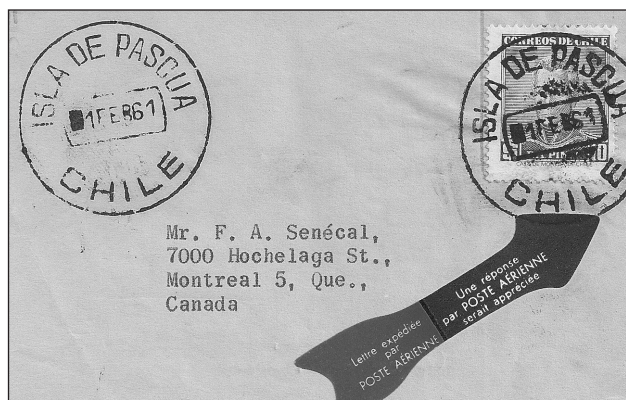


Figure 8. This cover was flown on the return trip from Easter Island on 1 February 1961. It is backstamped Valparaíso 3 February.



Figure 9. 28 January 1963 cover for the return flight by LAN Chile to Easter Island.

every year. When they were moved by boat, the male lobsters would fight and 10% of them would be killed; if moved by plane the altitude would make them sleepy and that did not happen (Driscoll 1972:145). Parragué obtained two PB-6A Catalina amphibians from the U.S. Navy, naming them *Robinson Crusoe* and *Manutara II*, and entered the business as Aeroservicios Parraga (ASPAR). Soon he was alternating tourists with lobsters, as the Isla Robinson Crusoe has been a Chilean National Park since 1935 (Driscoll 1972:146).

But the old urge was still with him and in January 1961 he proudly flew the first passenger and mail flight to Easter Island, using *Manutara II*.

Now Linea Aerea Nacional (LAN) became interested in Parragué's ideas of an international trans-Pacific route. LAN was founded as Linea Aeropostal Santiago-Arica, as part of the Chilean Air Force, on 5 March 1929 to fly between Santiago and Arica near the Peruvian border. It became an independent company named Linea Aerea Nacional de Chile in 1932. This name was abbreviated to LAN Chile from 1960 onwards. Progressively extending its services, it eventually linked the whole of the 2,650 miles length of the South Pacific eastern seaboard, which is Chile from the desert of the north to Tierra del Fuego in the far south. With this accomplished, LAN began to establish a network of profitable international routes.





Figure 10. Proof strike in red of the commemorative cachet made for covers on the 1965 flight.

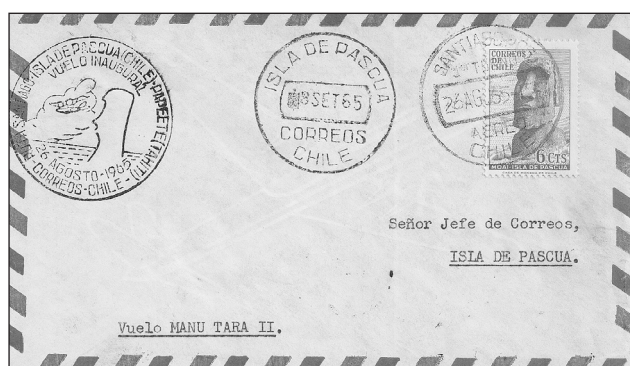


Figure 11. This cover has the special pictorial cachet made for the flight. It was also flown on the return flight and has an Easter Island date stamp for 3 September on the front and a final arrival mark for Santiago 12 September 1965 on the reverse.

In 1963, LAN chartered *Manutara II* with Parragué as pilot and invited him to fly Ignacio Aliaga, the company's president, and three others to Easter Island.

In 1965, LAN Chile sponsored Parragué to survey an extension of his Santiago – Isla de Pascua route on to Pape'ete, Tahiti. It was the cherished fulfilment of his dream when he set off in *Manutara II* on 30 August. The flight was a complete success and he returned to Chile on 12 September. This time Parragué was received with honors. Congress approved his promotion to general of the Air Force and he joined LAN Chile as its chief of navigation.

*Manutara II* was ferried to Canada in 1970 for conversion to a water bomber. Between 1988 and 2000, she operated in Spain and Portugal on fire fighting duties. In July 2007 she was acquired by Catalina Veterans of Rathmines, Australia, a restoration organization. She will continue flying for the enjoyment of Australian aviation fans.

LAN Chile had been operating a fleet of DC6bs. One of these, CC-CBF, was named *Manutara III* in 1966. The aircraft was modified to an all-economy class, forty seat plane, and a year later, following improvements to the long



Figure 12. Signed cover by Roberto Parragué for the return flight from Pape'ete, Tahiti to Santiago via Easter Island.



Figure 13. The stamps are cancelled with the outward flight cachet (Santiago – Easter Island) and the cover also has a Santiago date stamp for 8 April 1967. The wording on the cover has the error Eastern Island instead of Easter Island.



Figure 14. The reverse has an Isla de Pascua receiving mark for 8 April and the commemorative cachet with the wording reversed (Rapa Nui – Santiago) for the return flight on 13 April.

level landing strip on the island, inaugurated a fortnightly service between Santiago and Easter Island. The first trip was piloted by Roberto Parragué.

The forty seats on the first flight were all taken for the first tourist expedition to Easter Island which was





Figure 15. A passenger on the inaugural Boeing 707 service from Santiago to Tahiti attached this block of four of the stamps commemorating the flight to a photo illustration from a booklet and obtained the signature of the pilot and a cachet for the flight.

organised by Lindblad Travel of New York. The tourists included archaeologists, journalists, photographers and two philatelists who organised numerous philatelic souvenirs.

In 1968, Parragué's dream was totally achieved when the service was extended to the Faa'a International Airport at Pape'ete, Tahiti. Connections by Air New Zealand, QANTAS, and Pam Am to Fiji, New Caledonia, New Zealand and Australia achieved the completion of the world's last ocean airway. The South Pacific was at last spanned by scheduled carriers from South America to Australia.

In 1971, the DC6bs were replaced with Boeing 707s reducing the flight time.

On 25 December 1995, Roberto Parragué Singer died at the age of 82. Not only had he been a fabulous aviation pioneer, but he had been instrumental in opening a new era for the Easter Islanders, whose lives would be transformed by tourism to the island.

Mataverí International Airport, 2,336 miles from Santiago, is the most remote airport in the world. In 1984, NASA extended the runway to 10,885ft (over 2 miles), so that it could be used as an emergency touchdown for the U.S. space shuttle when polar orbital flights from California were

planned (McLaughlin 2007). This enabled wide-bodied jets to use the airport and LAN currently flies Boeing 767 aircraft to the island on its scheduled services. The French Concorde used the airport several times during the 1980s and 90s for a stopover on round-the-world tours. The runway starts just inland from the island's southwest coast at Mataverí and nearly reaches the south coast, almost separating the volcano crater of Rano Kau, and the ceremonial site of Orongo from the rest of the island. Easter Island is the smallest island in the world to have an airport with this capacity.

## References

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